DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 176 CS 210 715

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TITLE Sister and Brother Writing Interplay.
PUB DATE Oct 86
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Invitational Conference "New Directions in Composition Research" (Durham, NH, October 10-12, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Birth Order; Case Studies; *Child Language; Child Role; *Family Life; Family Relationship; Language Acquisition; Literacy; Parent Role; Role Models; *Siblings; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Readiness; Writing Research; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS *Childrens Writing; Informal Learning; Sibling Rivalry; Writing Attitudes

ABSTRACT

A case study detailed the influence of a nine-year-old female sibling on the writing development of her younger brother, from the time he was 18 months old until he was 28 months old. General and significant interactions, such as the boy's oral language milestones and the books the children shared, were recorded in a journal by their mother. Periodic transcriptions of reading and writing interaction were also made, and writing samples from both children were collected. Results indicated that although the older sister exhibited several teaching techniques--such as providing writing examples, demonstrating functional contexts for writing, organizing materials and writing sessions, and acting as researcher--her immaturity affected her teaching ability. Her choices of reading materials to share with her brother were not always appropriate, and at times, the children fought violently, despite the eight-year age difference. Findings suggest that parents should be concerned with teaching older siblings how to encourage literacy in younger siblings and how to supervise sibling interactions. (NKA)

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SISTER AND BROTHER WRITING INTERPLAY

Paper presented at the invitational conference, "New Directions in Composition Research" at the University of New Hampshire, October 10 - 12, 1986.

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SISTER AND BROTHER WRITING INTERPLAY

The learning of literacy for the very young is a social event. Children relax on our laps or sit next to us while we read and talk about the stories and pictures. They write sitting beside us or lying on the floor near us. They ask us to write the words they request and invite us to respond to their writing. They tell us "See," "Look," and "This looks like...," and they ask, "How do you write my name?" "How do you spell---?" "Is this how you spell---?" We are drawn into this web of coziness, and the children transfer their feelings of coziness in their interaction with us to literacy itself.

We know children learn language from adults. The impact of a caring caregiver who provides appropriate feedback in a risk-taking atmosphere has been successfully documented as a major criterion in the learning of oral language, reading, and writing within the family. The impact of more linguistically proficient brothers or sisters on a sibling, particularly in the acquisition of writing, is sparsely recorded.

Related Literature

In Oakland, California, Delores Durkin (1966) describes 40 early readers and writers who have at least one older brother or sister. 16 of these children note that one immediate family member gives them direct help in literacy learning. Two helpers are sisters and two helpers are brothers. A combination of family members gives help to the remaining 24 children. Mothers and sisters help 12 children; mothers and brothers help four children; fathers and sisters help three children; and, fathers and brothers help two children (Durkin, 1966, p. 53). Margaret M. Clark's study of young literate children in Scotland

mentions that several of her youngsters have older brothers or sisters who take particular interest in their younger siblings' learning, and give them help before the younger siblings are four years old (1976, pp. 53-54). While older siblings give direct help with sounds and letters, the younger children's persistent interest in writing and spelling encourage the older siblings to talk about the sounds of letters. Sometimes this help is productive and sometimes not (Durkin, 1966, p. 137).

Interest in reading feeds experimentation in writing. A frequent source of interest in whole words is the experience of older siblings' reading aloud enjoyable books (Durkin, 1966, p. 137). Many younger children also inherit their books from their older siblings (Clark, 1976, p. 50), and share excursions to the library. In Durkin's California population of 49 early readers, 14 children give credit to older siblings for teaching them to read (1966, p. 52). When Durkin questions the parents of the early readers in her New York population they say that sisters give more help (13%) with identification of numbers, letters and words, or printing and spelling than brothers (7%) (1966, p. 102). In general, the California siblings help more with reading (53%) than the siblings in the New York population (20%) (Durkin, 1966, p. 102). Durkin suggests that there may be more sibling influence in the California population because the families have more older siblings (82%) than the families in New York (54%), and the age difference between the siblings in the California study is smaller (Durkin, 1966, p. 102).

In fact, Durkin emphasizes that the probability of sibling help depends on the age difference between the children. She feels that the smaller the age difference, the greater the likelihood of sibling help, particularly when the next older child is a girl (Durkin, 1966, p. 136). However, Clark (1976, p. 41) states that in her group of early readers some of the older siblings are young enough to practice oral reading in front of their younger siblings as well as read to them, and some older siblings are so much older that they take a particular interest in the youngest, answering questions that intermediate siblings can not answer (Clark, 1976, p. 54). Gygo (1976) in her dissertation investigating relationships between birth order, sex, family size, sibling span, and reading achievement finds that the age span between the subject and his or her nearest sibling is not related to reading achievement.

Since some older siblings are helping their younger brothers and sisters with literacy, what kinds of activities help them communicate the processes? The 14 early readers in Durkin's California population recount their sisters and brothers in anecdotal footnotes (Durkin, 1966, p. 52).

> She [sister] was the best reader in the class. She got books for me. She told me what the words said.
>
> She brought home papers with lots of words. She studied and she kept on telling me the words.
>
> She read a book to me, and she pointed them [words] out when she said them.
>
> When my sister's not too busy she tells me words.
>
> My sister taught me how to sound out words. Now she doesn't play school so much because I know a lot of things.
>
> He [brother] told me every word in each book. He said, "Write these and you'll remember them."

Such activities as playing school are productive (Durkin, 1966, p. 136). Having time to spare, answering questions, and an interest in reading to younger children are also significant (Clark, 1976, p. 54). Duran and Guerra (1982) in a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association draw on script theory to describe two Chicano sisters, one in second grade and one in kindergarten. As the elder child reads English storybooks to her sister at home, she models a teacher reading to a child at school. Whenever she comes to a word she can not pronounce, she pauses, steps out of the teacher script, and asks for help, becoming a child at home in a family setting. The little sister spontaneously copies her sister.

The Problem

Yet we cannot assume that the more proficient sister or brother consistently models the caregiver or teacher role when she or he does not possess the life experiences, language ability or patience of an adult. And certainly the feedback and giving of directions are often more intense within the family. What even makes the older sibling interested in helping a younger brother or sister? What makes a younger sibling want to be with an older sister or brother? What then is unique about the sibling bond in the evolution of literacy?

On the one hand, some parents firmly state that all their educational efforts have gone into the first child. The eldest child now has to teach the younger siblings. Are then younger children at a disadvantage with a watered-down version of the understandings of the oldest? On the other hand, some parents state that they try to engage in as many activities with their younger children, but they do not have so much time and energy as they did with only one child. Then do younger

children have both older brothers and sisters and occasionally parents as teachers, perhaps benefitting even more than the eldest child?

Description of This Study

Because I was so impressed with the lack of research available on siblings and literacy, and have two children at hand, I decided to detail the influence of our nine-year old daughter, Giti, on the writing development of her brother, Adam, in his life from 18 to 28 months.

I recorded general and significant interactions, Adam's oral language milestones, and the books Giti shared with Adam in a journal, and periodically transcribed their reading and writing interactions. Videotaping and tape-recording were not successful because of the children's overwhelming interest in the machines, what I was doing, and their ebullient senses of humor. In general, the collection of writing samples proved to be neatest because Giti knew I had always dated her samples with an explanation of context. Therefore, she often wrote what Adam was saying while he was writing or drawing, and which object or person he said he had written or drawn. They both frequently wrote and drew on the same page. No particular directions about reading and writing were given to Giti, but my husband and I did read to Adam whenever he wanted and write whatever he wanted.

Data

Giti read to Adam the first week he was home from the hospital. She put books in his crib and turned the pages, reading or singing to him all the while. He loved singing with her or echoing the song. She drew pictures of him and for him, indicating their relatives or objects at hand. Within his first nine months he mangled and ripped many books and completely destroyed three of Giti's favorite volumes which she had preserved in wonderful condition from her own toddlerhood. Although Adam had his own pegboard desk with colored paper, small pads,

notebooks, crayons, and pens, he showed only extremely superficial attempts at marking paper. Once at 14 months he discovered a brightly colored marker in Giti's room and tatooed his arms and legs. When we urged him to stop and to draw on paper, he casually ripped a page out of a hardcover Dr. Seuss book on which to continue scribbling.

Giti was devastated. She had counted on a brother with whom she could share her love of books and poetry writing. She cried that he would turn out to be as rough as the boys in her class at school, and reminded us why she had wanted a sister. Our whole family became increasingly disheartened. I began to wonder if the suggestions about genetic language disability in boys could possibly be true. Finally one morning in Adam's eighteenth month, he asked for the reading of five books which he had selected. Giti started him on watercolors and he began to scribble with some preoccupation.

Figure 1

18 Months

She guessed that he would be interested in seeing his name and initials (ASB), so she provided them.

Figure 2

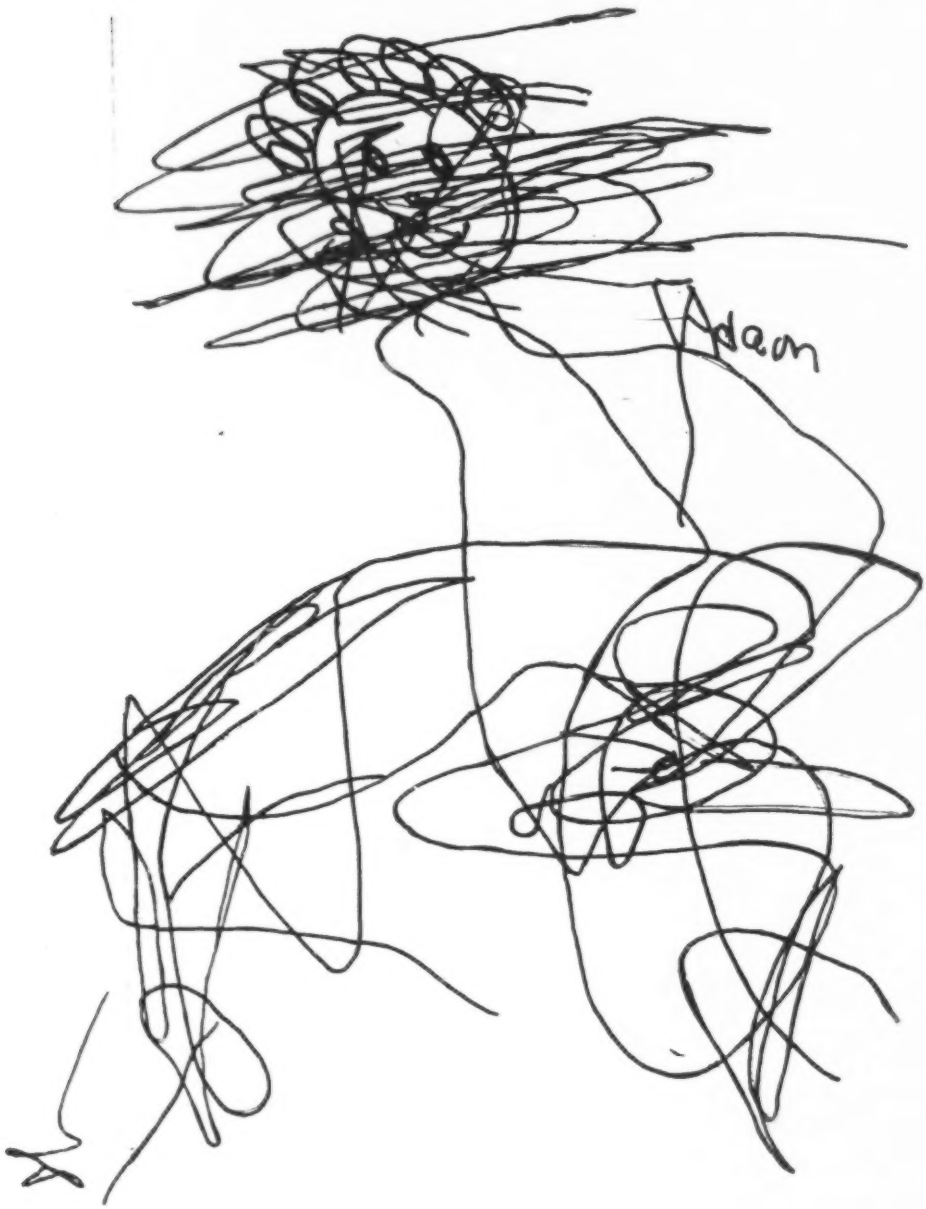
19 Months

In Figure 2 Giti and Adam are writing on small pages of paper from a pad. Giti wrote first, took her page off the pad and then lined up both her page and the blank pad for Adam.

In Figure 3, she started to draw him and write his name. He took over the paper with another pen, and scribbled on top of her drawing.

Figure 3

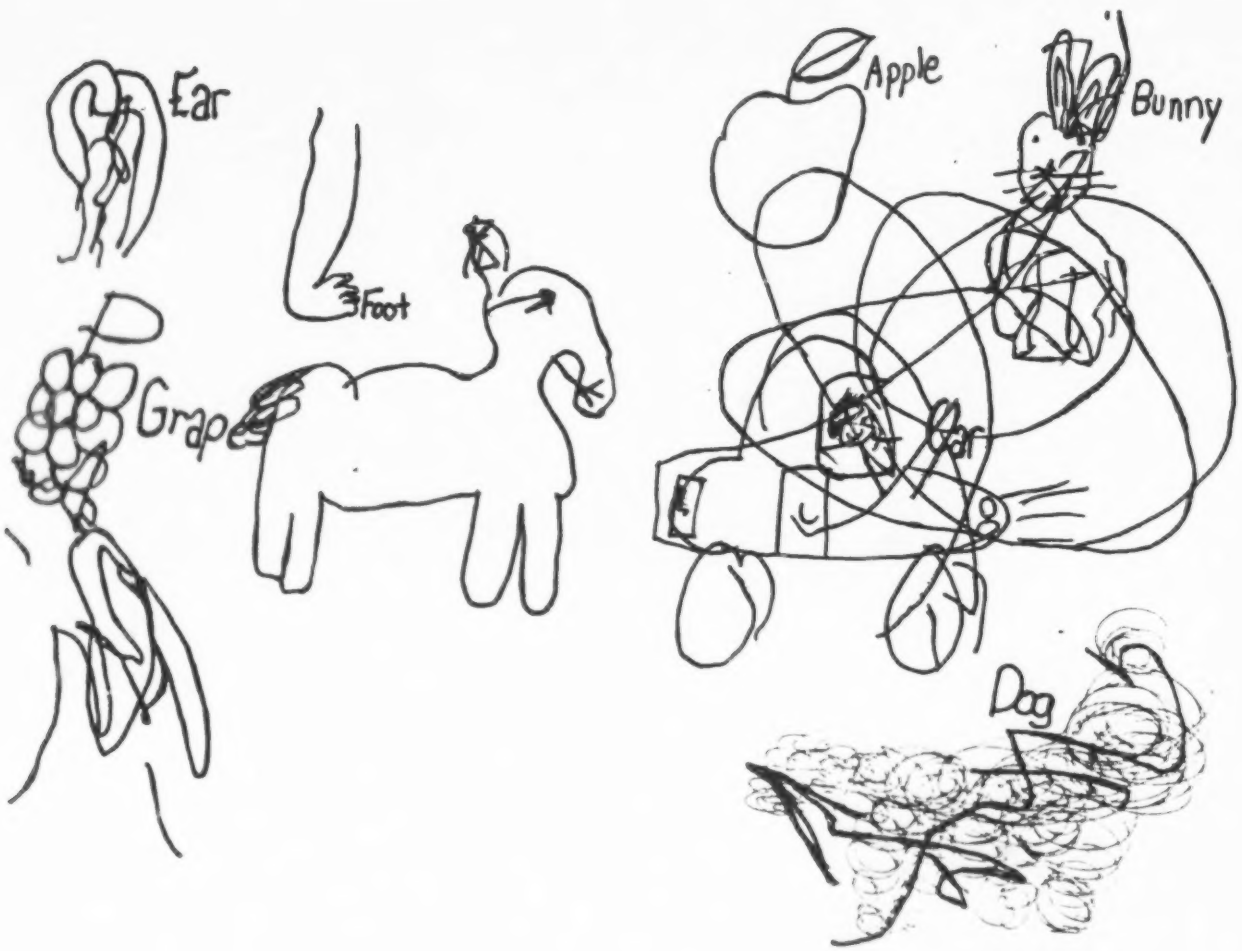
20 Months



Giti also drew pictures for him and labeled objects. Adam scribbled over the pictures or alongside.

Figure 4

21 Months



Meanwhile his own writing, as demonstrated in Figure 5, was no longer totally filling up a page.

Figure 5

21 Months

Giti not only showed Adam what writing and drawing look like and connected oral language by labeling, but she also demonstrated their appropriate functional contexts. When their father, whom they call "Baba," was sick, they made him a card. Giti drew a big flower with markers on the back cover and Adam decorated the front. Figure 6 represents the inside message which Giti wrote. They both signed the card.

Figure 6

22 Months

At the end of Adam's twenty-second month, his writing-drawing changed. Before a short trip in which he did not scribble, his samples look like Figure 7.

Figure 7

22 Months

After the trip, the darker markings that frequently appeared in circular scribbles appeared alone, as in Figure 8.

Figure 8

22 Months

Now when Adam wrote alongside Giti or drew with her, his samples showed different kinds of scribbling. One set of items was circular with congestion within, and one set of items had more back and forth linear strokes. Giti labeled Figure 9.

Figure 9

23 Months

Adam could also verbalize a concept of size about the products he produced. In his twenty-fourth month, he did small scratchings and said, "I write tiny." When asked if he could write big, he made larger

scratches over the tiny ones he had produced. Figure 10 contrasts the two samples.

Figure 10

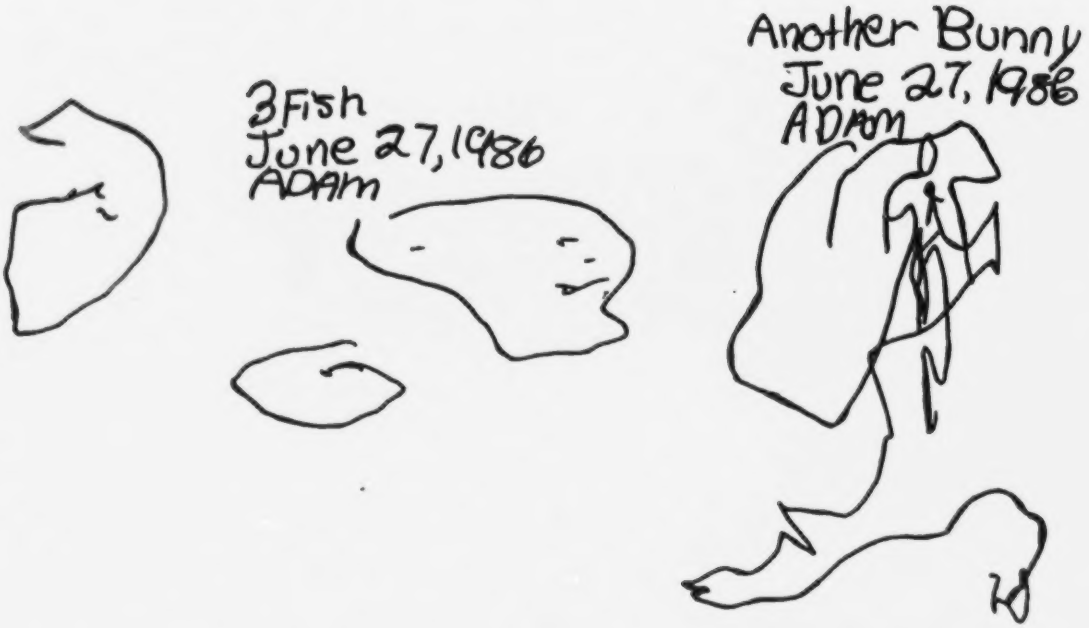
24 Months

After producing these samples he returned to his intense production of more tiny writings and said, "I write tiny a-gain."

In Adam's twenty-fifth month he began to label his drawings and to use the word "draw." Giti labeled the following "3 Fish" and "Another Bunny" in Figure 11 after he told her what they were.

Figure 11

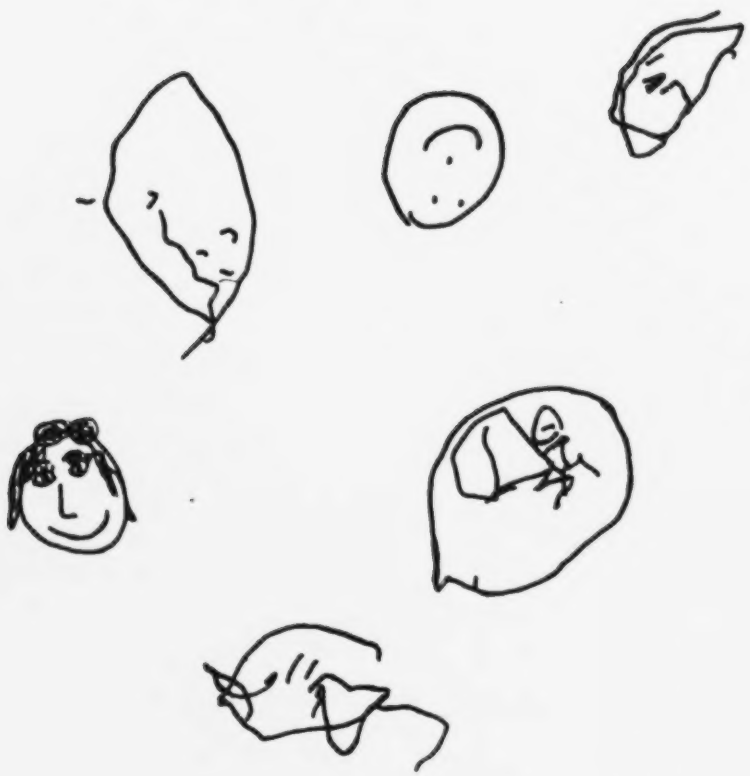
25 Months



Adam also continued to draw on the same page as Giti. In Figure 12 the top middle and left side pictures are Giti's. As Adam drew the other pictures he said, "Here are Camille, Gail, Grandma, Baba."

Figure 12

25 Months



He began to want to draw the people he knew, and he would ask Giti to draw familiar friends. Figure 13 is Adam's first drawing of Giti.

Figure 13

25 Months

Now when appropriate contexts for print appeared, Adam wanted his own share. The family was sending a congratulatory card and Adam demanded the back of the card for himself. In Figure 14, Giti had told Adam to draw and he made the circles. When urged, "Write your name too," he made the linear expansions.

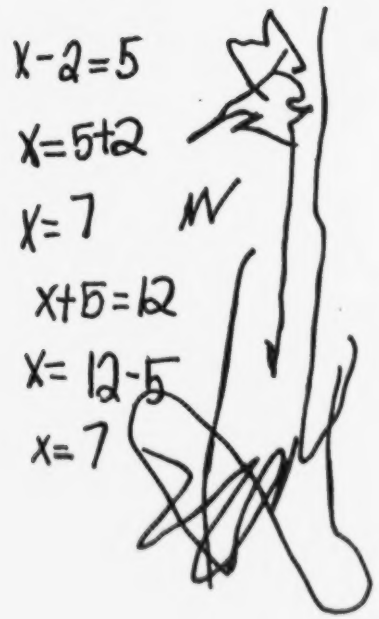
Figure 14

25 Months

Adam continued to work on his separations of schemata for writing and drawing. Giti continued to work on her curriculum. She started to introduce Adam to other symbol systems in print. Figure 15 shows a page of mathematics on which they both worked.

Figure 15

25 Months



In Adam's twenty-six month, Adam really caught on to letter-writing. Giti left him notes to find and showed him how to put letters in envelopes. Figure 16 is an example of their household correspondence, each removed from an appropriate envelope.

Figure 16

26 Months

Dear Adam,

How are you? I ♡ you.
Enjoying your day? You look
cute.

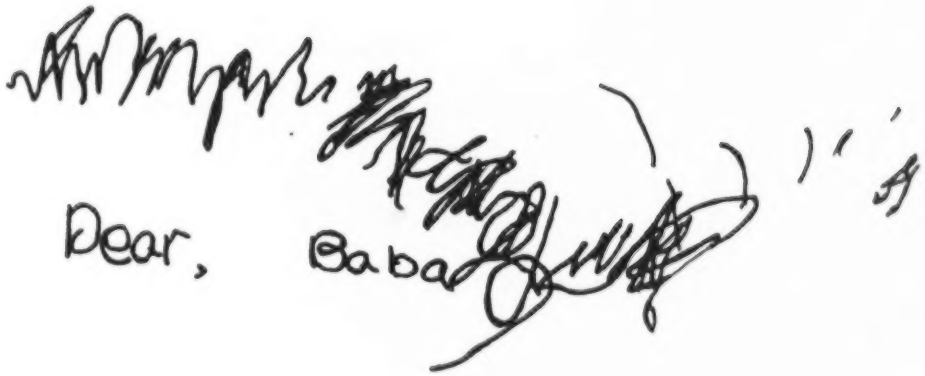
XXOO (infinaty)

Love,
Giti

At 27 months Adam had a clear idea about the beginnings of letters to not only practice his writing on a single page, but to verbalize its message. Figure 17 is an extensive linear expansion to which Adam repeated, "Dear Baba, Baba, Baba, Baba" and Giti labeled.

Figure 17

27 Months



In Figure 18 Giti has drawn a picture of Adam in his sleeper. Adam took the paper, turned it, and drew himself, labeling his body parts.

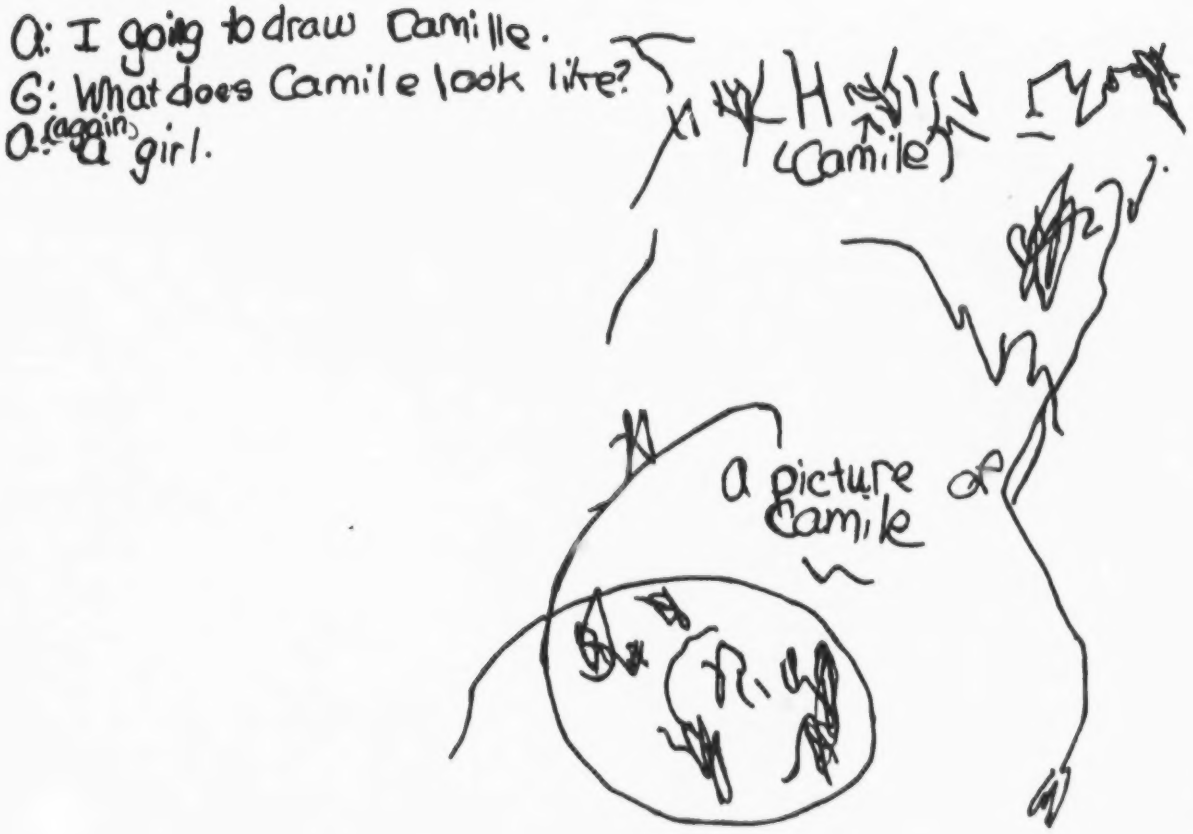
Figure 18

27 Months

In Adam's 28th month with Giti's guidance, Adam became confident enough to draw and write on the same page. Figure 19 represents Adam's representation of Camille, his absolutely favorite babysitter, and his conversation with Giti, which she recorded.

Figure 19

28 Months



Giti was invited to Great Adventure Amusement Park during this month and brought Adam a pen with a puppet on top as a souvenir. Adam was excited and happy to see her after missing her all day. He went to his desk, got some paper and honored Giti with Figure 20. Giti labeled what Adam said. He clearly separated writing and drawing on the same page.

Figure 20

28 Months

As Adam's 28th month progressed he began to work on units in what he called his writing. Figure 21 he labeled "Adam."

Figure 21

28 Months

Other units now appear together on the same page, as in Figure 22, the final figure.

Figure 22

28 Months

Summary

Giti demonstrates several teaching techniques. (1) She provides examples of writing by writing with Adam, for him, and to him. She writes his name and labels her examples of drawings both orally and in writing. When Adam wants drawing, she draws with him and for him. (2) Giti demonstrates functional contexts for writing such as the get well card, congratulatory card, letter-writing, and name signing. (3) Giti shows Adam other symbol systems such as mathematics. (4) Giti finds the materials such as paper and marker, thinks of topics, and organizes sessions. (5) Giti acts as a researcher, collecting and labeling Adam's products, while (6) encouraging the processes.

Adam, for his part, writes with Giti, for her, to her, and on her writing and her pictures. He demonstrates that marks are made on paper for a purpose and shows a sense of placement on paper for his products. He indicates a knowledge of appropriate contexts for writing and a sense of size in the products. In his development, he labels his written and drawn products and their parts, and clearly separates writing from drawing schemata. His last figure (Figure 22) indicates a separation of smaller fields within which to begin experimentation with letters and further refinement of letters. Certainly his drawings will continue to be refined as well.

Observations

In many ways, Giti is a sincere help to Adam. She prods him by saying, "Let's draw" or "Let's write a letter." She prods us by urging, "Buy Adam this," "Adam needs that." In fact, her ideas of what Adam needs or how he should behave can conflict with ours as parents. The differences between older sisterhood and parenthood often need negotiation.

Giti has passed on her easy books to Adam, shared markers and paper, and even tried to teach him board games. Unfortunately, her generosity also leads to conflict when Adam feels he can help himself to any of the books on her shelves and go through her desk drawers to "just look."

Giti has a curriculum for Adam. She finds the hours for Sesame Street, Mr. Rogers, and Romper Room and is happy to sit and watch with him. She has learned to calm him by reading to him and they both enjoy the closeness. She reads and writes in front of him, and since school has started her modeling literacy in the form of doing homework is constant.

However, we have not always wanted Adam to model everything Giti does. She recently started nailbiting and he jammed his hand in his mouth too. He also loves hairbands, pocketbooks, stickers, nightgowns, and Barbies. While we were able to keep Giti from extensive sugar and salt during the first three years of her life, we have not been able to limit Adam as well because of Giti's penchant for popsicles, Oreos, and soda.

Eight years difference in age has not made Giti a third parent. We are constantly shocked at how violently they fight. She frequently echoes the familiar, "He hit me first." The age difference can even encourage conflict. Giti is in preadolescence, wanting her precious treasures as hers, while Adam as the typical two-year-old thinks every item in the house is his. Moreover, Giti questions our decisions often, pushing for her way of doing whatever we are doing. Adam also wants his will to come first.

Giti's immaturity naturally affects her teaching ability as well. As a child she makes decisions that parents would not make. For example, she gave Adam watercolors at 18 months, which we felt was too young. At

first, Adam handled the painting pretty well. When he started drinking the water and sucking the brushes, we had to take the paints away. Giti also selected books for Adam that were too long and too difficult. One real killer, Stories for 365 Nights, is a favorite of Giti's. Adam so loves her that he would lean on her and sit and listen while she rambled on and on. However, during the summer vacation, Giti more and more frequently chose difficult books and ran the television while she read to Adam. In Adam's 27 month, he refused to read for days. We had to intervene and firmly tell Giti to show us the books she selected to read to Adam ahead of time. For the thousandth time, we repeated. "No TV while reading!" Giti exclaimed, "How do I know what I'm doing! I've never been a big sister before." Herein lies the dilemma. Older siblings can ignore younger ones as much as possible or they can chose the intensive, longitudinal interaction that is much like parenthood. If they opt for this closeness, the relationship is as intense and love-hate in the area of literacy as any other. Boredom may set in. Mistakes are often made.

As literacy specialists, we talk frequently about parent training programs to encourage literacy. This small study implies that we must also be concerned with the training of parents in teaching older siblings how to encourage literacy and with the advisement of parents in how to supervise sibling interactions. Perhaps we should even launch workshops for older brothers and sisters themselves. As Emerson noted in 1866 in his journal, "Best masters for the young writer and speaker are the fault-finding brothers and sisters ... who will not spare him, but will pick and cavil, and tell the odious truth" (Emerson, 1903, p. 62). When events go well, Adam pays better attention to Giti and learns faster from her than he does us. Such a unique bond provides a relationship on which we must capitalize to promote traditions of family literacy.

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